

Beautiful Day for a Neighbor

Luke 10:25-37

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Stephen Ministry is an international interdenominational caring ministry program which Grace Covenant has been a part of for about 15 years. Some of you know the program well, either because you have been trained as a Stephen Minister or because you have partnered with a Stephen Minister to receive care. It really is a remarkable program designed to provide one-on-one caring during times of stress or crisis. Stephen Ministers receive 50 hours of training in such areas as listening, caring and responding, use of scripture, prayer and peer support. The idea is not that they solve any problems, but that they walk with fellow Christians when you need someone to talk with and pray with. They provide support and a shoulder to lean on when someone needs extra care. Stephen Ministers are someone to talk to, someone to help you think thru a problem, to help you focus and find your own solutions, to encourage you to move forward in whatever way is best for you. Stephen Ministers are very good at reminding us of God's love and grace.

There are others in this congregation, and perhaps in your lives, who provide excellent care and extend the ministry of this congregation. Our deacons not only lead in our service and mission projects, they also are on the front lines of our caring ministries. They are the first ones we pastors call to care for families when they need it, and often the first ones you call when you have a concern or when you know of a concern in the congregation. We also have hospital visitors and home visitors. We have people who offer to sit with loved ones in a hospital, or drive people where they need to go. You know who you would call if you need help - maybe they are sitting down the pew from you today. Maybe they are across the room. And maybe you don't know who you would call. Well especially for you, let me invite you today. If you need a hand, if you need someone to talk to - call me or call anyone on staff, or call your deacon or any elder, call any of the Stephen Ministers who are leading worship today. And we will get you to the right place. We will find an ear to listen or a shoulder to lean on. You are not alone.

One of the things that worried me when Jay was leaving was the pastoral care - who would people turn to when they needed something, how would we know if someone needed help, who would be there and who would do the practical hands-on caring. As I've mentioned there are a lot of people already in place - willing and able to respond. But for 25 years Jay has been the one whom people called first, Jay was the one who visited in the hospital, or listened during a crisis. So without Jay right here - that's a major change in the life of this congregation.

When I was reading this scripture - this very familiar old scripture about the good Samaritan. I suddenly saw this scripture in an entirely new light - something that's hard to do with something so familiar. I suddenly saw myself in the role of the lawyer - the good faithful hardworking person who wants to do the right thing. The lawyer was talking to Jesus. The lawyer really wanted some honest answers about how to live life. I don't think the lawyer was trying to trick Jesus, or find a way around the law. The lawyer really wanted to be sure he was living right, doing the right thing. And so he was asking - what must I do? And Jesus says - you already know. You know the right things to do. You've been doing it all your life. You know to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. You know. Love your neighbor as yourself. You know you are called to love - and for the most part you do it. But the lawyer just wasn't sure. And he wanted to be sure. We all want to be sure. So he asked a little more. But who is my neighbor? Who is your neighbor? Who are you called to care for? Well, of course, after years and years of reading this story - we know the answer. It is everyone. Every single person is our

neighbor. We are called to care for anyone we can care for, to show love in any way we are able. Each and every one of us is called to give care.

Now, here's my revelation. Just like the lawyer in this story, I was asking the wrong question. The question is not "who is my neighbor," "who do I have to care for," or even "who is going to lead the pastoral care at Grace Covenant?" The answer is "God is the one who will provide the care. Count on it! And we all can be instruments of that care if we belong to God." Remember the scripture passage for the day... or better yet, open your Bibles and look at it. As Jesus is telling the story, the people would understand completely what he was talking about. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..." Oh that's a commonly traveled route, and one that's a little dangerous. Most of the people hearing this story would have made that route or knew someone who did. They would instantly identify with the traveler. They would know what precautions had been taken. They would also know that the unexpected could happen at any time. Tragedy can strike without a moment's notice. We've all been there - had a car accident, lost a loved one, or a job, had an unexpected illness or crisis, or something worse - like the man in the story - assaulted and robbed. Who would you turn to? As Jesus tells the story, the people begin to think, who would I turn to? Who will help me when I need it? Well, they think of the priest. They think of the Levite. They think of the leaders of the community, the leaders of the synagogue. That's who would help. Of course. But in the story, for some reason, the priest doesn't help, and the Levite doesn't help. If you're listening to Jesus' story, you are thinking, "Wow, if the leaders aren't going to help, who will?" "Who will?"

My question, "Who is going to lead the pastoral care at Grace Covenant?" is turned around. The answer is no longer "Jay will." The answer remains, "God will."

"God is the one who will provide the care. And we all - every single one of us - can be instruments of that care if we choose to do so, if we choose to belong to God and to be used by God, wherever we find ourselves."

At Grace Covenant, we expect the care to come from the Pastors or the Deacons or the Stephen Ministers - and here's the good news - it still will. None of us will be passing by on the other side of the road. The care will continue to come. You can always call on us. But in addition to the Pastors and the staff, and the deacons and the elders and the Stephen Ministers and the hospital visitors and the home visitors and the teachers and youth advisors and the PW circle friends and the Men of Grace and the Covenant Group members and the Connections and Care Team and prayer chain and prayer group and any other group or individual in this church you can think of. In addition to this platoon of care givers, there is an entire faith community of care givers ready to respond. Every single person in this room. You are the neighbor. You are ready to respond to a person in need - inside these walls or along whatever road you find yourself. And every single person in this room has what it takes. God will give you whatever you need to respond, if you are willing to love. So your question is - what are you called to do? How are you called to love? And who is the neighbor? Not just the good Samaritan. Who is the neighbor? Every single one of us. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself."